

Marian T. Adolf
Editor

Nico Stehr: Pioneer in the Theory of Society and Knowledge

 Springer

Editor

Marian T. Adolf
Department of Culture and Communication
Zeppelin University
Friedrichshafen, Baden-Württemberg
Germany

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Contents

Part I On Nico Stehr

1	A Short Biography of Nico Stehr	3
	Marian T. Adolf	
	References	4
2	Nico Stehr, Sociology, Knowledge and the Sociology of Knowledge: An Introduction	7
	Alexander Ruser	
2.1	Introduction	7
2.2	Sociological Traditions and the ‘Discovery’ of the Knowledge Society	9
2.2.1	Merton, Elias and the Threat of Losing History	9
2.2.2	Reclaiming History and Conceptualizing Knowledge: The Influence of Karl Mannheim	10
2.2.3	Understanding and Making Social Worlds—Knowledge as a Capacity to Act	11
2.3	Of Markets and Meteorologists: Challenges for Worlds Made of Knowledge	12
2.4	Conclusion	13
	References	14
3	Reflections on Society and Knowledge: An Interview with Nico Stehr	17
	Nico Stehr and Marian T. Adolf	
3.1	On Nico Stehr’s Career and Biography	17
3.2	On the Knowledge Society and Knowledge Economy	24
3.3	On Knowledge Politics	27
3.4	On the Fragility of Modern Society	28
3.5	On the Future of Modern Society	29
	References	31

4 Complete Bibliography of Nico Stehr’s Writings 33

4.1 Books 33

4.2 Edited Books 35

4.3 Book Chapters 38

4.4 Refereed Articles 50

**Part II Knowledge, Science, Society: Nico Stehr’s Work
from the Perspective of Colleagues**

**5 The Knowledge Society: Remarks on the State of Affairs
on the Occasion of Nico Stehr’s 70th Birthday** 61

Gernot Böhme

5.1 Introduction 61

5.2 The Ongoing Self-appropriation of Society 63

5.3 Knowledge as Participation in the Cultural Capital
of a Society 64

5.4 Education as Information 65

5.5 Reason, Science and Alternative Forms of Knowledge 66

References 69

6 Knowledge Paradigms and Intransigent Intuitions 71

Susan A. McDaniel

6.1 Introduction 71

6.2 The Census of Canada 73

6.3 The Cancellation of the 2011 Long-Form Mandatory
Census 73

6.4 Census as a Knowledge Base 75

6.5 Conclusion 79

References 79

**7 New Forms of Civil Society: The Social Question
of the 21st Century** 81

Hermann Strasser

7.1 Introduction 81

7.2 What Kind of Society We Live In 81

7.3 Volunteers: Stopgaps or Social Innovators? 83

7.4 The Social Question of the 21st Century 85

7.5 Summary 86

References 86

8 The Scientific Ethos: The Case of Climate Change 89

Reiner Grundmann

8.1 Cooperating with Nico 89

8.2 Climategate 90

8.3	Merton’s Norms of Science and Criticisms	92
8.4	Climategate and Scientific Norms.	95
8.5	Institutional Responses?	99
8.6	Sanctions?	100
8.7	Conclusion	101
	References	103
9	Social Science: A Must for Climate Research	107
	Hans von Storch	
9.1	Nico and Me Wandering Through Climate...	107
9.2	Climate Science as a Physical Approach?	110
9.3	What Is Needed from Social and Cultural Sciences?	111
9.4	Epilogue	113
	References	113
 Part III Selected Key Texts by Nico Stehr		
10	The Ethos of Science Revisited: Social and Cognitive Norms	117
	Nico Stehr	
10.1	The Normative Structure of Science	117
10.2	Critiques of the Ethos of Science	122
	10.2.1 Are the Norms of Science Peculiar to Science?	123
	10.2.2 Are the Norms Prescriptive?	126
	10.2.3 Are the Moral Imperatives Moral?	128
	10.2.4 Are the Functional Imperatives Functional?	128
10.3	Conclusion	129
	References	129
11	The Magic Triangle: In Defense of a General Sociology of Knowledge	135
	Nico Stehr	
	References	139
12	Karl Mannheim	141
	Nico Stehr (with Volker Meja)	
	Further Reading	142
13	The Sociology of Knowledge and the Ethos of Science	143
	Nico Stehr (with Volker Meja)	
	References	155
14	The Power of Scientific Knowledge and its Limits	159
	Nico Stehr	
14.1	Calculability and Power	163
14.2	Post-Industrial Society	164
14.3	Knowledge as a Natural Force	166

14.4	The Limits of the Power of Scientific Knowledge	168
14.4.1	Thinking Against Knowledge	168
14.4.2	The Compartmentalization of the Life-World	169
14.4.3	Mythological and Scientific Truths	170
14.4.4	Organized Knowledge and Traditional Knowledge	172
14.5	Science and Ignorance	176
14.6	Conclusions	176
	References	177
15	The Culture and Structure of Social Inequality	181
	Nico Stehr	
15.1	Industrial Societies and Social Inequalities	183
15.2	Knowledge Societies and Social Inequalities	186
15.3	Knowledge as Bundle of Competencies	192
15.4	Conclusion	196
	References	196
16	The Economic Structure of Knowledge Societies	199
	Nico Stehr	
16.1	The Diminishing Role of Primary Materials	202
16.2	The Changing Manufacturing Sector	206
16.3	Production Against Employment	213
16.4	The Social Anatomy of Work	220
16.5	From the Employment Society to the Consumption Society	226
16.6	The Emergence of the Symbolic Economy	228
16.7	The Eclipse of Time, Distance and Place	229
16.8	New Limits to Growth	233
16.9	The Fragility of the Future	235
	References	236
17	The Productivity Paradox: ICTs, Knowledge and the Labor Market	243
	Nico Stehr	
17.1	Introduction	243
17.2	The Productivity Paradox	245
17.3	Employing Information and Communication Technologies	247
17.4	The Loss of Agency or the World of Work in Industrial Society	248
17.5	Agency or the World of Work in Knowledge Societies	250
17.6	The Growth of Knowledge Workers	252
17.7	Outlook	257
	References	257

18 Knowledge Politics: Policing Knowledge 261
 Nico Stehr

18.1 Introduction 261

18.2 Policing Knowledge 262

18.3 Knowledge Politics 263

 18.3.1 Regulating Knowledge 265

 18.3.2 The Social Control of Knowledge Claims
 in Science 268

 18.3.3 The Societal Regulation of Knowledge 269

 18.3.4 The Public and Science 272

 18.3.5 The Development of Social Controls 273

 18.3.6 Knowledge Hierarchies and Monopolies 275

18.4 Prospects 282

References 283

19 The Social Role of Knowledge 287
 Nico Stehr

19.1 The New Understanding of the Social Role
 of Knowledge 288

19.2 The Classical Sociology of Knowledge 290

19.3 The Status of Sociology of Knowledge in Sociology
 in the Post-War Years 292

19.4 The Paradigm of the Sociology of Knowledge 293

19.5 Limitations of the Sociology of Knowledge 295

19.6 The Transformation of the Sociology of Knowledge 297

19.7 Possibilities of the Sociology of Knowledge 298

19.8 Toward a Sociological Concept of Knowledge 299

19.9 Modern Societies as Knowledge Societies 302

19.10 The Political Economy of Knowledge 303

19.11 Concluding Observations 306

References 306

20 Modern Societies as Knowledge Societies 309
 Nico Stehr

20.1 Introduction 310

20.2 Knowledge Societies 311

20.3 Knowledge About Knowledge 313

20.4 Knowing the Known 314

20.5 Knowledge as a Capacity for Action 316

20.6 Knowledge as Capital 318

20.7 The Limits of the Power of (Scientific) Knowledge 321

20.8 The Knowledge-Based Economy 323

20.9 Individual and Collective Social Conduct in Knowledge Societies 324

20.10 Prospects 328

References 329

21 The Moralization of the Markets in Europe 333

Nico Stehr

21.1 What Is the Moralization of the Markets? 334

21.2 What Is Responsible for Morally Coded Markets? 336

21.3 Markets in an Age of Ecological and Global Modernization 338

21.4 Possible Objections to a Theory of Morally Coded Markets 342

References 342

22 Climate Change: What Role for Sociology? 343

Nico Stehr (with Reiner Grundmann)

22.1 “Time is Running Out” 344

22.2 Reasons for Sociological Abstinence 345

22.3 Prospects for Multidisciplinarity 347

22.4 The Virtues of Constructivism 349

22.5 Climate Change at the Heart of Sociology? 351

References 353

23 Exceptional Circumstances: Does Climate Change Trump Democracy? 355

Nico Stehr

23.1 The Rise of Exceptional Circumstances 357

23.2 The Erosion of Democracy 358

23.3 Enlightened Leadership? 360

23.4 Science, Knowledge, and Democracy 361

23.5 Enhancing Democracy 362

Recommended Reading 364

About the Author 365

About the Editor 367

About the Contributors 369

Index 371

Chapter 7

New Forms of Civil Society: The Social Question of the 21st Century



Hermann Strasser

7.1 Introduction

It was a great honor for me to emotionally and scientifically celebrate with many others the 70th birthday of my friend and colleague Nico Stehr. He is not only the guide of the knowledgeable society but also the visionary of the moralization of markets and the social constructionist of climate change, not to mention his expertness of experts.

By focusing on new forms of civil society I try to combine three of Nico Stehr's visions: First of all, not to restrict scientific ideas to the halls of academia. Second, to make a rather fragile society worthwhile to live in. And third, to have in mind Max Weber's goal of being a scientist, which means to strive for being surpassed by other knowledge producers. Thus, we have to ask ourselves what *society* we live in, how significant *civility* is and whether new forms of civil society are *replacing* or just *extending* traditional structures and meanings of community or are simply representing *hybrid* constructions.

7.2 What Kind of Society We Live In

In other words, we should take a look at the ways people understand community in modern society. This society is no longer characterized by 'naturally' occurring forms of belonging based on orientations provided by traditional institutions like the family, the church, school, unions, and political parties. Today, people in most modern societies live longer, are more qualified, more mobile, have higher incomes, see more women join the labor force, and less children are born.

Prof. em. Dr. Hermann Strasser, Chair for Sociology, Universität Duisburg-Essen;
Email: hermann.strasser@uni-due.de.

This, as you know, is the individualization story. But it is also Nico Stehr's story about the *fragile society* emerging from an increasingly knowledge-based system of economic production and social organization. In this individualized *knowledge society*, individuals have expanded their capacity to act and, thus, also their capacity to say no—with the consequence that major social institutions have lost the capacity to have their way. The other consequence is that the more we know, the less we can predict the future. This has led politicians to exercise “the sovereign handling of non-knowledge”, as the political scientist Korte (2012) argues—of course, in accordance with the theory of public choice based on the individual profit-oriented thinking of the economists. However, if knowledge ages faster, new realities need a new point of view, as Stehr (2000) would say.

Not only knowledge but also *networking* has become more important, as many long-term communities have been replaced by short-term networks. This does not necessarily mean that volunteering is also becoming less sustained and more episodic. However, as Putnam (1993, 2000) argued, “plug-in volunteering”, task-oriented on a short-term basis as it is, will be promoted. Nevertheless, civic or voluntary engagement is the broadest and most useful notion, with the core element of active citizens participating in organized forms of engagement. Civic activities take place in the public sphere more or less regularly, they are voluntary, based on one's own initiative, independent from the state, beyond the market and the family, and in essence not being paid for (cf. Strasser/Stricker 2011).

Moreover, the *state* is in many ways overtaxed, the globalization process makes the democratic system less controllable, and educational expansion extends both the need and the capacity of people to participate. As the Brazilian NGOs studied by Elisa Reis demonstrate, the more an NGO is linked with external actors, the better it is anchored domestically (Koslinski/Reis 2009).

The political realm has also broadened in another sense, as new forms of communication allow for new social platforms through internet-based mobilization and transnational networks. The shifting boundaries between the public and the private spheres will have consequences for civic engagement, for example with internet portals operated and supported by volunteer welfare organizations such as the *Diakonie*, that help young men and women to solve their social, financial, and mental problems. In other words, we are faced with *cultural transformations* which social scientists must capture and experts must shape by reducing complexity.

This means not only strengthening the respect for others, especially strangers and those who want to remain anonymous at first. It also implies an extension of self-regulation (cf. Billante/Saunders 2002). However, civility as learned behavior will extend social capital in terms of individual resources and collective trust only if civil engagement is enacted and acknowledged in social life. This is even more important in our media-managed attention economy, with attention as the new currency (cf. Franck 2005). As the commission of inquiry of the German Bundestag concluded in 2002: “Those who call for engagement must also promote competence and offer an appropriate context.”

7.3 Volunteers: Stopgaps or Social Innovators?

Therefore, we have to look for new variations of established, as well as novel ways of organizing social solidarity beyond the state, the market, and the family, in the so-called non-profit sector. But not only do we have to think about new measures of organizing solidarity but also of ways to create a feeling of belonging, thus making society worthwhile to live in. Indeed, the *willingness* to become civically engaged seems to be on the rise in most countries. Still, the *forms* of engagement are changing as well.

In other words, what is at stake is to enable community and organize solidarity. But what *kinds of engagement* make a society work beyond the provisioning welfare state? Is it charity or associational membership, political participation or community service that makes the difference?

Undoubtedly, civic organizations of the non-profit sector are still value-oriented communities, but at the same time they are *multifunctional*. With their services in the areas of nursing, education, sports, and coaching, they are not only part of the market. They are also political actors articulating the interests of their members. With the trend toward more professionalization, these third-sector organizations seem to go through a cycle of change from value communities to service enterprises. This is not the case to the same extent everywhere, perhaps more so in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands than in Germany, Austria, Italy, France or the Scandinavian countries.

We simply do not know enough about people and their motivations for civic engagement in leading positions and in volunteering. Is it self-realization, pleasure in voluntary work or the chance to learn more about an interesting job that motivates them?

Let me therefore briefly illustrate my postulates and assumptions by referring to the present state of civic affairs in Germany. In the 1990s, we stated a *decline* of community oriented forms of relations, which generated doubts about the continuity of solidarity and civic sense. A few years later, this opened the discussion about the consequences of demographic change. We became witnesses of talk about a “senile society” with all its nursing and pension burdens. Economic questions came to the fore. Even George W. Bush made himself heard by saying that the civic sense should above all heal the wounds of the market.

But civic sense is much more than a band-aid for these wounds, just as civic engagement is more than just a stopgap for non-profitable niches or subsistence gaps. This discussion finally led to the contrast between the model of the welfare state and the model of civil society. In this tension between welfare state and civil society the central question arose of how to achieve a fruitful balance between state-organized solidarity and privately arranged responsibility. As civic sense and voluntary engagement cannot be decreed by law, various parts of the welfare system must adapt themselves through the power of self-control. In a society with a shrinking population there is no other alternative to master the challenge of less people having to produce more.

In both models, there is no question that older people gain in importance. They will claim more services of the welfare system. At the same time, the number of older people increases who are in good health, well educated, economically secure, and have more spare time. This has motivated social scientists and politicians to announce the age of “productive aging” for the well-being of society. And yet we know very little about these developments. We are once more confronted with the *paradox* of the knowledge society: The more knowledge is being produced, the less we know about its effects in the future.

But there are two things we know for sure: First, both quantitative changes in age groups and qualitative changes in older life phases will have a tremendous effect upon the composition, the intergenerational relations, and the quality of life of future cohorts. Second, it is also sure that older people, including even silver foxes like Nico Stehr, cannot simply be activated without adapting structural conditions and developing a new understanding of their role. In other words, a bridge must be built between entering retirement age and getting involved in spare time activities. The intellectual decline does not begin with 55, 60 or 65 years. Just as life-long learning has no age limit, paedagogic and social competences do not correlate with age.

The German academic community could actually benefit a lot more from its experienced ‘oldies’ equipped with lots of social and cultural capital by bringing them effectively together with the younger generation of scientists. More than ten years ago, this idea encouraged Nico and me to propose the foundation of a “University of Silver Foxes”, what we ironically called a ‘Greisenuniversität’ (“geriatric” or “aged university”). We received a number of encouraging comments, including an exciting one from the former Austrian minister of education, Elisabeth Gehrler. She was very interested in the idea but not successful in making it a reality. Its realization then apparently happened at Lake Constance.

That an *increase* in civic engagement by older people is indeed possible may also be demonstrated by the data of the German Voluntary Survey of 1999 and 2009. In 1999, 29 percent of the age group of 65–69 years reported voluntary engagement, ten years later the percentage was 37. The main areas of older volunteers were sports, the church, and social work. They clearly prefer volunteering within an institutionalized framework.

However, these engagements also happen in a fast changing environment: On the one hand, with the opening of the market for social services such as ambulant care, this sector has been *economized* in order to increase both the efficiency and the productivity of its organizations. Higher service quality and qualification standards have led to an increased *professionalization* of welfare organizations.

On the other hand, we observe a change in the *motives* for civic engagement in general. That is to say, people, including the elderly, are increasingly confronted with their own limits, their personal and social identity when expressing their competence as well as their ways of self-realization by taking over responsible activities. Unlike in former times, belonging to a certain milieu is no longer decisive. Now, other qualities are more relevant, for example: communicative competence, the ability to organize and to negotiate and, not least, to realize one’s own

interests, as this is closely related to personal development. Rather than (collectively oriented) selflessness, the main motivation now is (individually oriented) self-realization. What we can recognize and what various studies confirm, is a trend *from the helper to the voluntary expert* (cf. Strasser/Stricker 2008).

7.4 The Social Question of the 21st Century

In order to master the transition from a welfare state society of the past to an active civil society of the future, two elements are of great significance: *participation* in societal actions and *appropriate forms* of voluntary engagement. How, to what extent and how quickly these challenges will be mastered is the social question of the 21st century.

If fewer young people live together with more old people, a new formation of collective trust and individual networks is not just the social cement that holds society together. These newly formed networks based on norms of reciprocity and trust also represent a kind of power station for new social relationships and new social capital. This power station will deliver the energy for the necessary bonding ability in modern society. In this sense, civic engagement will turn out to be the mediator and broker of a successful living together of future generations and institutions.

Nevertheless, a lot has still to be done if these postulates should ever become reality. The main point is that in Germany as well as in many other countries, voluntary engagement is not sufficiently made *accessible*. Studies show that the civic potential is high, since about half of those who are not volunteering are interested in getting civically engaged. Another important point is that networking with professional services must be improved. Most intermediary organizations have actually 'learned' to survive without volunteers. Their rules are pretty much determined by the needs of the funding agencies and the paid employees. There is no doubt that both the market and the state play a central role in the modern welfare mix. But these structures must be adapted in order to integrate volunteers with regard to their needs of time and content. To put it differently, there is a *discrepancy* between the *willingness* to volunteer and the *factual* engagement.

Of course, with regard to the complexity of the work process and the different motivational structures of employees and volunteers it is not easy for welfare organizations in general, or for a nursing home in particular, to direct these two groups in a parallel way. But in the long run, the increase in efficiency achieved by integrating volunteers will match and surpass by far the higher costs incurred at the beginning. The managers in charge of the structure of organizations which include volunteers must keep in mind the economic necessities of as well as sufficient margins for volunteers as co-producers.

In other words, societies like Germany are confronted with the fact that there is not a lack in engaged women and men but rather a lack in *appropriate*

organizational structures, i.e. the general conditions of voluntary action. State regulations should therefore focus upon the intermediary organizations rather than upon incentives on the individual level of the volunteers.

7.5 Summary

Under these circumstances, I am convinced that there is no other alternative to the active self-organization of citizens in response to the challenge of modernizing public welfare but to adjust organizational structures and to recruit old and new volunteers on this basis. If this is accomplished, the social question of the 21st century will be successfully dealt with. It is the only way of creating a civil society, even if these developments may take on different forms in different cultures with different traditions, structural conditions, and individual challenges.

Then, the time may have come for *immaterial sources* of welfare such as education, friendship networks, neighborhood help, unhurt nature as well as humane cities and institutions to come to the fore in the age of decreasing growth. Less will then be more, as Hondrich (2007) argued. Social, that is, shared wealth is at stake, which is not to say that cooperation and participation will do away with egoism, self-interest, and stubbornness over night (cf. Bosshart 2011).

And everything that makes life worth living will then be included in the *gross national product*, as Robert Kennedy claimed as early as in 1968—the time when Nico Stehr began to explore the continent of unlimited possibilities. Good luck, Nico, in detecting new possibilities in the next 31 years since you promised to invite me to your 101st birthday party!

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